

Efforts to save a special bird – the spoon-billed sandpiper

Last year an international team of ornithologists devised a bold plan to rescue one of the world's rarest birds. Gerrit Vyn reports.

- A** At first glance the spoon-billed sandpiper resembles other small migratory birds of the sandpiper family that breed across the Arctic. But it is the only one to have developed a flattened bill that flares out into a 'spoon' at the end, and that makes it special. If it becomes extinct, thousands of years of evolution will come to an end, which would be a real tragedy.
- The bird's Russian name, kulik-lopaten, means 'shovel beak', which is an apt description of a remarkable structure. The bill is 19 mm long and 10 mm wide near the tip and the edges are lined with sharp serrations, called papillae. Theories have varied as to how the bill functions; one suggestion is that the sandpiper sweeps it through the water in a similar fashion to its larger namesake, the spoonbill. But Nigel Clark, a leading authority on the sandpiper, says the comparison is misleading.
- B** Until a few years ago, the spoon-billed sandpiper had never been fully documented, which added to its fascination. But an air of mystery is not helpful if you're a Critically Endangered species. So the organisation 'Birds Russia' decided to produce a photographic and audio record of this imperilled bird with the help of experts round the world. In May of last year, I joined the international expedition to one of the species' last breeding strongholds in North-East Russia. The primary aim of the two-and-a-half month expedition, however, was to collect eggs from wild sandpipers; those eggs would then be hatched in captivity nearby. Later, the chicks would be flown to the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) headquarters at Slimbridge in the UK, in order to establish a small, self-sustaining population there. These birds would provide a 'safety net', an insurance policy against the wild birds dying out.
- C** You might wonder why birds like the spoon-billed sandpiper travel such great distances, about 8,000 km in total, from their wintering grounds on the tropical coasts of Bangladesh, Burma and Vietnam in South-East Asia to breed on the low land, commonly called tundra, in North-East Russia, but from the birds' point of view it is worth it. Though they often arrive to find hostile, wintry weather while they are finding their mates and making their nests, there are relatively few predators there, and the abundance of insects that emerge during the brief but intense Arctic summer creates ideal conditions for raising their chicks.
- D** Two main factors are responsible for the sandpiper's recent rapid decline: the ongoing destruction of stopover habitat on its migration route and hunting on its wintering grounds. The development of new industrial cities is destroying former tidal areas, where sandpipers and other migratory birds used to rest and refuel. Subsistence hunting is certainly a hazard in some Asian countries, where hunters trap birds for food. Conservationists are targeting this problem with small-scale interventions. For example, hunters from 40 villages have been given alternative